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AUTHOR	Phinney, Joanna; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This student guide for a program concerned with why children put so much energy into play, what play means to them, and what they learn from it, provides suggestions for what parents can do to encourage and support this important aspect of their children's growth. Designed around a magazine format to allow maximum flexibility to different groups using the materials, the guide is divided into seven sections: (1) an overview of the theme and contents; (2) a summary of the major learnings of the theme; (3) feature articles containing the major content and including practical suggestions for parents; (4) a film review section which includes a synopsis of the accompanying film program and a related discussion question; (5) three activities aimed at both individual and group participation; (6) a selection of field activities, discussion questions, and research topics designed to reinforce the ideas presented in the articles and meet the needs of a wide variety of classroom groups; and (7) a bibliography for further reading on the theme. (Author/JEG)

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PLAY AND FANTASY:

THE CHILD'S BUILDING BLOCKS

ED 1699936

True Blue

Student Guide

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A world to be born under your footsteps...
St.-John Perse

FROM THE EDITORS

Play, it has been said, is the child's work. To a child, play is as vital as breakfast in the morning. To a youngster, a day without play is no day at all.

In this booklet you will learn why children put so much energy into play. You will learn what play means to them, and what they learn from it. You will also learn what parents can do to encourage and support their children's play, and how parents, too, can benefit from this important aspect of growth.

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THE BIG IDEAS

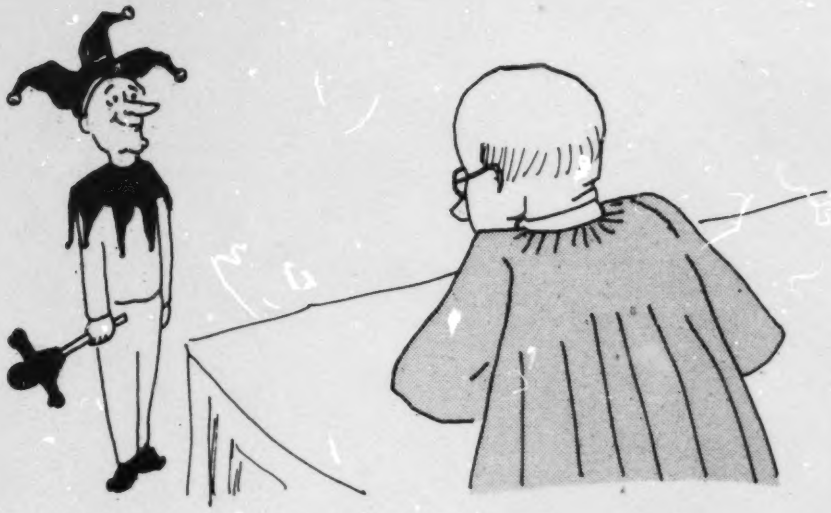
- For children, play is a necessity as well as a delight.
- Through play children learn about themselves, other people, and the physical world.
- Parents enrich their children's play by playing with them and providing new experiences, play materials, and playmates.
- Watching and joining in their children's play helps parents enjoy and understand their children better.

Block City
What are you able to build with your blocks?
Castles and palaces, temples and docks.
Rain may keep raining, and others go roam,
But I can be happy and building at home.

Let the sofa be mountains, the carpet be sea,
There I'll establish a city for me...

— *Robert Lewis Stevenson*

IN DEFENSE OF PLAY



Children have played throughout the ages, and they continue to play today. Many adults don't understand children's play, and some even consider it a waste of time.

Let's pretend that Play is brought to trial in one of the highest courts in our land. Here is a transcript of that trial, including a newspaper reporting of the court's landmark decision.

The Prosecutor represents all those unhappy adults who have forgotten how to play. The Defense speaks on behalf of all children, as well as all adults who remember what it was like to be a child at play.

Morning Session

IN WHICH THE COURT DECIDES ON A DEFINITION OF PLAY

JUDGE: Of what do you accuse these children?

PROSECUTOR: Of play.

JUDGE: Play is such a general word. It means different things to different people. Please give the court a definition.

PROSECUTOR: Play is the opposite of work. Work is useful and serious. But play is just a luxury, an escape from challenge and worry. It's relaxing and doing what you want to do.

DEFENSE: I object. The Prosecutor gives only an adult point of view. Play has a different meaning for adults than for children.

Most adults in this country are so caught up in the work ethic that they feel that play is a frill, but to children, play is a necessity and a challenge.

Children put every ounce of energy and concentration into play. Play is their way of learning about themselves, other people, and their entire physical world. What could be a more important task for young children?

JUDGE: Let the prosecutor resume. Please state the facts of the situation as you see them.

PROSECUTOR: I've seen babies put spools in cans and take them out again, endlessly absorbed in this useless process. . . .

DEFENSE: (aside) That's how babies practice their eye-hand coordination and learn about sizes.

PROSECUTOR: I've seen toddlers removing pots and pans from the cupboard, stacking them in different ways. They were creating a mess and were totally delighted with it.

JUDGE: You've stated that children enjoy play. They repeat the same actions over and over again. They explore household articles. What else?

PROSECUTOR: I've seen preschoolers arranging all the kitchen chairs in a line. They were making high pitched sounds, holding a paper towel tube and making "shshshsh" noises with it. . . .

DEFENSE: (aside) That was a brilliant way of making a fire engine and imitating the firemen using a firehose.

PROSECUTOR: I've even come upon a child talking to the thin air as if he were talking to his best friend.

DEFENSE: (to his associate, with disgust) That was probably the child's imaginary playmate. Doesn't he know that fantasy is an important part of play?

PROSECUTOR: I've also seen a 4-year-old arguing endlessly with another about who would be the mother in their housekeeping game.

DEFENSE: (forgetting himself) That's play all right!

JUDGE: (to Defense) Since you agree with the definition, are you ready to proceed with your defense?

DEFENSE: Yes.

Afternoon Session

IN WHICH THE COURT DISCUSSES THE VALUE OF PLAY

DEFENSE: I would like to question the prosecutor.

PROSECUTOR: This is unorthodox!

JUDGE: You may proceed.

DEFENSE: Mr. Prosecutor, do you value the ability to set problems, analyze them, and come up with alternative solutions?

PROSECUTOR: Why, yes.

DEFENSE: Then you can't object when children set their own problems. Those toddlers using the pots and pans were creating their own spatial problems — how one container fits inside another. Naturally curious, they set harder and harder problems — problems that help them understand the properties of the physical world. They develop thinking skills through this play:

Play strengthens children's intellectual development.

PROSECUTOR: Humph!

DEFENSE: Mr. Prosecutor, you scoff at babies shaking rattles, toddlers dropping spools into cans and then removing them, and preschoolers moving chairs. These are small and large motor tasks that children have set for themselves:

Through play children develop physical coordination.

Mr. Prosecutor, do you value the ability to concentrate and stick with a task?

PROSECUTOR: Of course I do.

DEFENSE: Then you can understand why those preschoolers hardly seem to hear you when they are playing with chairs and paper towel tubes — intensely recreating an entire fire fighting scene:

Learning how to concentrate in play helps children form healthy study and work habits.

Mr. Prosecutor, do you value the ability to get along with people?

PROSECUTOR: Certainly. Everyone does.

DEFENSE: Then how could you object to two girls arguing about who will play the mother? By playing with others, children learn the give and take of relationships. Learning how to share toys and roles, learning how to plan together — all these are outgrowths of play:

Play strengthens children's social development.

Mr. Prosecutor, have you also seen a preschooler scolding her doll: "You're going to get a spanking for messing with those pots and pans?"

PROSECUTOR: (surprised) I forgot to mention that...

DEFENSE: Young children are just learning to accept rules and restrictions: "Don't wet your pants." "Don't touch Mommy's lipstick." "Don't get your party dress dirty." It's often difficult for a child to accept and follow these rules.

But play and fantasy let children experience control and power. When they're playing, children are boss. Play and fantasy help them work through their emotions. In play children can act out their anger. A child can spank her doll and yell at it without fear of punishment:

Play helps children regain emotional stability.

Finally, Mr. Prosecutor, have you really watched children play? How could you miss the joy, spontaneity, and enthusiasm children express when they play.

Through play children gain the feeling that the world is an enjoyable place to live in.

Mr. Prosecutor, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are inalienable rights in this country.

(to Judge): Your honor, I submit that play not only be permitted, but encouraged and supported by parents.

Morning Session (Next Day)

IN WHICH PARENTS TESTIFY AS TO HOW THEY ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S PLAY

DEFENSE: When we think of play, we don't usually think about parents. We forget that it's parents who create a playful — or unplayful — atmosphere in the home. To testify to this fact, I wish to call Mr. Bruce Simonetti, a model father, to the stand.

PROSECUTOR: (blustering) What? Parents getting involved in play? Well, I *never*...

JUDGE: Please proceed.

DEFENSE: Mr. Simonetti, please tell the court what you do to support your children's play.

MR. SIMONETTI: Well, what I do is really easy:

I play games with my children from the time they are babies.

I enjoy this. And my children thrive on it! There's no end to the games we invent. All I do is take cues from my children.

For example, with our baby Kathy, I watch to see what she enjoys. This could be dancing, or making sounds for me to copy, or playing peek-a-boo. Like most babies she practices simple actions, such as shaking her rattle over and over again.

My toddler Mike invents more complex play. He hides toys under a blanket, fills boxes to the brim, and pretends to be asleep — games I would never dream of.

My preschooler Ruth gets more imaginative and varied ideas. She explores objects, arranges them in order, builds and pretends with them. She transforms tricycles into racing cars and jungle gyms into rocket ships.

PROSECUTOR: (aside) Playing games with his children. How unmanly. How undignified. His children won't respect him...

MR. SIMONETTI: My children are delighted when I get down on the floor and play with them. They feel important when they learn that grownups respect their ideas and that grownups care.

DEFENSE: Thank you Mr. Simonetti. You may step down.

Would Ms. Carla Dukes, "Mother of the Year," now please come to the stand and describe how she plays with her children.

MS. DUKES: I've discovered a number of ways in which parents can become involved in their children's play. First of all:

Parents can add fantasy and playfulness to everyday situations.

This makes everyday routines more relaxed and enjoyable. "Flying your helicopter upstairs to bed" is much more fun than walking.

Another important aid to children's play is this:

Parents should provide things for their children to play with.

You know, children find a way to play with anything they see — toys, furniture, pots and pans, and their own and their parents' belongings. Parents have to find things that are safe and acceptable for their children to use. I provide household objects, such as empty boxes, clothes pins, and old clothes, for my children to play with.

Of course, I buy some toys for my children. When people ask me which toys are best suited to their children's age and abilities, I tell them just to watch each child play. What does their child like to do: chew, shake, hit, bang, push, pull put things inside of other things, fit things together, take them apart, make models of things, pretend?

Once parents know their children's interests and abilities, they can make or buy toys that help children pursue these interests and practice skills. For example, a string tied around an old stuffed animal transforms an ignored plaything into an exciting pull toy for the toddler who is beginning to push and pull things about.

When people ask me what kinds of toys to buy, I tell them to balance toys that do only one thing with toys that can be used in many ways. Most puzzles just fit together and that's all. Blocks, on the other hand, can be used to build, line up, bang together, or sort by shape.

PROSECUTOR: (to himself) Will this windbag never run out of air?

MS. DUKES: Well, I guess that's about it.

DEFENSE: Thank you, Ms. Dukes. You've been most eloquent.

My last witness is a nursery school teacher. Ms. Tina Holmes, would you please take the stand and give us your testimony.

MS. HOLMES: I'd be glad to. I firmly believe that:

Parents should provide playmates for their children.

Children learn new things from each other. For example, one morning my son Felix made a castle. His friends Mark and Jeff had never heard of a castle. They watched Felix make a tall building with decorative triangles and wedges.

Later Mark and Jeff tried to recreate Felix's castle and ended up with a totally different building. As they experimented, they learned new principles in block building. Playing together also deepened their friendship and improved their social skills.

The only other point I want to make is that:

The more children experience, the richer their play becomes.

Parents can broaden their children's experience by taking them to see people, places, and things outside the home.

The best trips are active. For example, children need to climb on a fire engine, get in the driver's seat, and listen to the siren. Afterwards, parents can supply children with a few props, such as old galoshes and a worn hose, to recreate their experiences.

DEFENSE: Thank you, Ms. Holmes. Very helpful testimony.

Lastly, I wish the court to consider this:

Playing with children has tremendous benefits for parents.

Through play parents become more aware of their children's interests, concerns, and developing skills. Play also brings parents closer to their children.

JUDGE: The Court is adjourned until tomorrow morning. I will announce my ruling at that time.

The Washington Tribune
Wednesday, February 3, 1978

(Cont. from p. 1, "Play on Trial")

Judge Craig ruled that play is "one of the most precious activities our children engage in. Play is the basis for their emotional, social, physical, and mental development. Parents should encourage and support play in every way."

The Prosecution was said to have been shocked at the outcome of the trial. He had no comment to make to the press.

The Defense was reported to be elated. "Parents who support their children's play are contributing to every aspect of their development," he said. He encouraged parents to continue this important work.

FILM REVIEW SECTION

True Blue

Allison Sandburg has an imaginary playmate named Big Blue. Allison talks to Big Blue, plays with him, and builds him a house. She even brings him to lunch. Allison's father, Amos, enjoys Big Blue, but Jeannie, Allison's mother, is upset by Big Blue. Finally, after Allison has an unsuccessful experience jumping rope with two older girls, Jeannie decides Allison is becoming too involved with Big Blue. She says he must stay in Allison's room.

Because Jeannie won't let Big Blue go to the zoo the next day, Allison doesn't want to go either and hides. Amos finds her and persuades her to come, but Allison is very sad. At the zoo Jeannie discusses the situation with Grandpa. He reminds Jeannie that as a young child she had a doll that was very important to her. Jeannie finally understands why Big Blue means so much to Allison. She admits her mistake to Allison, and — happily — the two of them go off to find Big Blue.

WHY DOES BIG BLUE MEAN SO MUCH TO ALLISON?

ACTIVITY PAGES

activity #1
MAKING A PLACE FOR PLAY

By using fantasy or play, parents can make daily routines more enjoyable, relaxed, and interesting for themselves and their children.

Think of at least two ways parents can add fantasy or playfulness to each of the following everyday situations:

Getting dressed

Making beds

Coming down to breakfast

Washing up and brushing teeth

Fastening seat belts

Picking up toys

Getting ready for bed

Taking a car or bus trip

activity #2
MAKING A PLAY FOR PLAY

You are a nursery school teacher. At a parent conference, one parent wants to know why children are playing all day instead of learning at school.

What would you say to this parent?

What aspects of play could you point out to help her understand that learning does take place during play?

activity #3
CUE CARDS

By following children's cues, parents can find many opportunities to play and learn with their children.

In each of the following situations, comment on:

how the child is benefiting from play

how the parent can join in.

Carrie Ellis notices that her baby, Jennie, loves to bounce up and down.

When Sam Harvey gives a toy to his baby Jason, Jason promptly throws it away and laughs.

Peg Walpole finds 2-year-old Cindy bending over and making noises into empty pots and pans.

When Sarah Stevens calls to 3-year-old Timmy, he laughs and hides under the table.

Mike Wong notices his 5-year-old son Steve pretending to give his brother a shot.

Ben and Barbara Phillips notice that their 4-year-old daughter, Marilyn, always wants to play "mother."

GRAB BAG

to do

1. Observe a child playing in a day care center, nursery school, Head Start center, your home or neighborhood. Watch the child for at least 30 minutes and take notes on:

   how the child uses toys and play materials
   how the child seems to be benefitting from play
   whether the child is playing alone or with others
   how the child seems to affect and be affected by other children's play
   what parents or teachers do to encourage the child's play
   what else the adults could do to enrich the child's play.

   Write up your notes and summarize what you learned from this observation.
2. Observe how a baby, a toddler, and a preschooler play with the same kind of toy or material (for example, a ball, sand, water, blocks, or a doll). Describe how their play is similar and how it differs.
3. Either working alone or with other students re-enact play you've seen children engage in. Analyze and list the skills you think children gain through this play.
4. Visit the toy department of a department store and look at the variety of toys available for children at different ages. Report to your classmates on:

   which toys can be used in different ways
   which toys you would recommend.

5. Some parents keep a special box of scrap materials and old household objects for their children to play with. Survey your own home, and consult books on children's play. Make a list of materials and objects you would put in such a play box.

to discuss

1. Try to remember how you used to play as a child:

   Did you invent games or learn them from other children and adults?
   What did you like to do best?
   What do you think you learned from your play?
2. What does "play" mean to you now?

   Has your attitude toward play changed from when you were a child? How?
   Why do you think this happened?

3. How do you and other members of your family relax and play together? How do you benefit from this?

to research

1. How children play in other cultures. Pick 2 or 3 different cultures and compare the games that children play, the toys and materials they play with, and the roles and fantasies they act out.
2. Different theories about the value of play. Select from the writings of: Jean Piaget; Maria Montessori; Sara Smilansky; Susan Isaacs; Sigmund Freud; and Joan Cass.
3. How children move from playing by themselves (solitary play) to playing with other children (parallel and cooperative play).
4. The history of toys and games in this country:

   Where did different toys and games originally come from?
   How have they changed over the years?
   Why do you think this happened?

5. Play therapy. How do psychologists use play and fantasy to help children deal with their emotional problems?

BOOK BROWSING

Here are some books that contain more information on...

...children's play

The Complete Book of Children's Play. Ruth E. Hartley and Robert H. Goldenson. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1963. (paperback)

Understanding Children's Play. Ruth Hartley et. al. Columbia University Press, 1952. (paperback)

...playing with children

How to Play With Your Baby. Athina Aston. New York: Fountain Publishing Company, 1971. (paperback)

How to Play With Your Children. Brian and Shirley Sutton-Smith. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1974. (paperback)

...materials and opportunities that encourage children's play

Beautiful Junk. Dianne Warner and Jeanne Quill. Order from: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402 (booklet)

The Block Book. Elizabeth S. Hirsch, ed. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1974. (paperback)

Child's Play. Lynda Madaras. Culver City, California: Peace Press, 1977. (paperback)

Mud, Sand, and Water. Dorothy M. Hill. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1977. (booklet)

CREDITS

Curriculum Development
PRIMARY AUTHOR: Joanna Phinney, Ed.M.
CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS: Laura Dittmann, Ph.D.
Robert Huebner, Ph.D.
Joanna Phinney, Ed.M.

Content Development
DIRECTORS: Laura Colker, M.A.
Charles Flatter, Ed.D.
TECHNICAL CONSULTANTS: Laura Dittmann, Ph.D.
Robert Huebner, Ph.D.
John Kurtz, Ph.D.
Bonnie Tyler, Ph.D.
Martin Bloom, M.A.

Design & illustration Sheila Humphreys

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